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“Musik des unendlichen Spielwerks”.

Poetology and the depiction of play and games in Klingsohr’s *Märchen*

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In the sumptuous finale of the first part of Heinrich von Osterdingen (1802), at the end of the veritable allegorical *tour de force* that is Klingsohr’s fairy tale, the newly crowned sovereign Eros receives a basket containing “eine steinerne Platte mit schwarzen und weißen Feldern” together with “eine Menge Figuren von Alabaster und schwarzem Marmor”.¹ Perseus, the giver of this symbolic gift, exclaims: “Hier [...] sind die Reste deiner Feinde”.² It is, however, the character of Sophie, demigoddess acting in the *Märchen* as both the guardian and personification of wisdom, who first speaks of this object as a chessboard, “ein Schachspiel”, to then add, “[A]ller Krieg ist auf diese Platte und in diese Figuren gebannt. Es ist ein Denkmal der alten trüben Zeit”.³ While the topic of war here is an astute reference to the conversation in the previous chapter between Klingsohr, narrator of the *Märchen*, and his disciple, protagonist of the novel, the ancient and mournful times to which the chessboard is memento or, perhaps, meant to ward off, represent the origin, outside the dimension of signs, of something that, in the meantime, has taken shape and – irrevocably become a sign. This sign is nought but the *Märchen* itself, and play and games – as can already be seen from these few lines – establish an emblematic type of relationship with it, so much so that they form a central element in the structure of the fairy tale-like narration. The words put into the mouths of Perseus and Sophie indeed form the point of arrival – and for us departure – of a path that, thanks to an allegoresis pushed to the extreme, gives multiple layers to, shifts and con-

¹ Novalis, *Heinrich von Osterdingen*, in *Schriften. Die Werke Friedrich von Hardenbergs*, edited by Paul Kluckhohn and Richard Samuel, W. Kohlhammer Verlag, Stuttgart 1960ff., vol. 1, pp. 183-369, here p. 314.

² *Ibidem*.

³ *Ibidem*.



denses the meanings that are conveyed by the poetic word and emerge as a symbol.⁴

Starting from the first part of the work (*Die Erwartung*), which is prevalently structured as a novel, the path progressively leads to the fairy tale. This is why Astralis' song, placed at the start of the second part (*Die Erfüllung*), is meant to be the lyrical threshold of a world that has become a dream and of a dream that has already amply penetrated the world of the narrative.⁵ The poem is simply an illustration in verse of the *Märchen*, of its ritual function as a passage from one dimension to the other, if only in the author's intentions.⁶ The long passage of surreal prose that Klingsohr offers to his listeners and, above all, to Heinrich, therefore acts as a mirror in which the main elements of the protagonist's journey leading up to the poem – an intense, adventure-filled journey, begun in his inner self with the vision of the “blaue Blume” in the first chapter – rapidly intertwine with each other, like in the *stretto* of a fugue.

The *Märchen*, like in other parts of the novel, breaks off the narrative flow. Hence, for the author and for his readers it becomes the opportunity to access another dimension, not strictly or consequentially connected with what immediately follows. Instead, it intertwines with the rest, making way for simulation and fantastic reflection.⁷ Herein, one after the other, Novalis touches on topics and motifs taken from the whole narrative span of the *Oferdingen*, setting them out like pawns in one big poetic game. From this perspective, the images become less important in purely referential

⁴ In the programmatic sense of a “romanticization” of the world through poetry; in this connection, see the well-known no. 105 of the *Logologische Fragmente* in Novalis, *Schriften*, cit., vol. 2, p. 545 [“Die Welt muß romantisiert werden”].

⁵ “Die Welt wird Traum, der Traum wird Welt”. Novalis, *Oferdingen*, cit., p. 319. In this connection see Sophia Vietor, *Astralis von Novalis. Handschrift – Text – Werk*, Königshausen & Neumann, Würzburg, 2001, p. 136ff.

⁶ For a study on Novalis' *Märchen* which classifies it under the genre of allegorical fairy tale, see Max Dietz, *Metapher und Märchengestalt, III Novalis und das allegorische Märchen*, in «Publications of the Modern Language Association», XLVIII (1933), no. 2, pp. 488-507.

⁷ The reference is to the previous myths of Arion and Atlantis, which occupy part of the second and the whole third chapter.



terms; however, at the same time they take on a whole new significance within the fantastic dimension that they help to create.

This underlying intent becomes clear especially if considered in light of the elements making up his poetics – which for him is always also a “logic” – of the imagination. In a letter addressed to Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis speaks of the characters in the *Märchen* as “einzelne Züge bloß, als Arabeske”,⁸ that is, as signs belonging to the magical and autonomous world of art, whose movements, considering the many meanings that the word *Züge* can assume, can easily be compared to the “moves” in a board game. All this without yet feeling the need to clearly distinguish the symbolical and allegorical levels, as Goethe would instead do soon afterwards. In doing so, he adapts the perspective of the *Kunstmärchen* to his own philosophical convictions – thinking it the other way would lead to an error of perspective. In other words, while for him the characters of Arctur-Saturn and the Scribe represent, respectively, “der Zufall, der Geist des Lebens” and “der petrifizierende und petrifizierte Verstand”,⁹ and the characters of Ginnistan, the Father and the Mother can be interpreted as allegories of imagination, mind and heart, this is so not so much in the wake of an established allegorical tradition, nor so much of a then unthinkable *Regelpoetik* of the fairy tale, but on the basis of free poetic-philosophical reflection. It is this autonomy that outlines the scope (*Spielraum*) of the literary creation. However, the terms of this reflection are able to suddenly alter into hieroglyphics, that is, into the holy signs of a dual world, superimposed onto the usual one, in which things have “scharfen Umrissen” that go beyond the pure reality of things.¹⁰ And it is precisely in this dual world that the game can take place.¹¹

⁸ Novalis, *Paralipomena zum “Heinrich von Ofterdingen”*, in *Schriften*, cit., vol. 1, p. 358.

⁹ *Ibidem*. We can read the following note in the *Paralipomena*: “Saturn=Arctur”, *ivi*, p. 345.

¹⁰ The inevitable passage on hieroglyphics is found in Novalis, *Ofterdingen*, cit., vol. 1, p. 237.

¹¹ On play and games in general, see Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, translated by Meyer Barash (Illinois: The Free Press, 2001). That among the early Romantics the allegorical procedure became the catalyst for a poetology oriented towards a play on meanings was noted by Jochen Hörisch, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft der Poesie. Der Univer-*



So let us return to the initial image. In Novalis's text, the element of the chessboard performs a very precise function, as it subsumes and trenchantly represents the playful *ratio* behind the narrative. This detail may refer to the second act in Lessing's *Nathan*, which also starts with a famous scene that depicts a game of chess.¹² In both cases, the negative forces are transfigured in the chessboard and thus sublimated and neutralized within the game. However, ultimately, unlike in *Nathan*, in Klingsohr's tale it is not a simple war between men or religions that is caught up in the playful mathematics of chess, but the metaphysical war *par excellence*, that is, the absolute and timeless struggle between chaos and cosmos. The consequence of a worldview based on a notion of analogy that strives to mirror the ontological dynamic of nature and the universe, the chess metaphor, as already noted by Luciano Zagari, is not just one of the many emblems around which the constellation of images marking the apotheosis of the mystical wedding between Eros and Freya is structured, but a genuine turning point for the whole story. It is therefore for a very precise reason that the incredible mass of quasi-indecipherable, arcane and fantastic images employed by the narrator in the scene immediately preceding the end of the *Märchen* are rounded off by the figure of the chessboard. While, as Zagari quite rightly observes, "the image of the game of chess fixes and blocks the hostile forces", this happens because these forces "had been reduced to a single scenographic dimension" in the narration. Thus, this is the reason that in the finale of Novalis' *Märchen* "harmony is represented as a network of relationships operating smoothly together".¹³ That is, one may add, just as if we were inside a clever and well-devised game.

salitätsanspruch von Dichtung in der frühromantischen Poetologie, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1976, p. 193ff., in which, among other things, the author provides a thorough interpretation of the *Märchen*.

¹² In other words the match between Saladin and Sittah. Also in this case the scene proves to have a strong poetological value, see Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Nathan der Weise*, in *Sämtliche Schriften*, third extended and revised edition edited by Karl Lachmann and Franz Muncker (Götschen, Stuttgart & Leipzig 1886-1924), vol. 3, p. 39ff.

¹³ Luciano Zagari, "Uno spettacolo per Eros". *Dimensioni nichilistiche nella fiaba allegorica di Novalis*, in *Mitologia del segno vivente. Una lettura del romanticismo tedesco*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1985, pp. 187-204, here p. 200, own translation. For Zagari chess is the sign of the



Having said that, the potentially endless – and multifaceted – process of merging meanings into a surface criss-crossed “mit schwarzen und weißen Feldern”, needs to be traced back to its basic speculative presuppositions.¹⁴ Hence, it must be considered from a poetological point of view, that is, as a sort of *mise en abyme*¹⁵ of the author’s very poetics. In an interpretation of Klingsohr’s *Märchen* that aims to account for this precise aspect, it will thus be opportune to deviate from a line of interpretation that is too oriented towards *Dekonstruktion*,¹⁶ and instead start from the early Romantics’ reflection on the intrinsically playful nature of poetry, language and knowledge.

While it is true that at the start of the 19th century intellectuals already widely perceived the difference between reality and language – a difference that then was already made to derive from the loss of a previous ideal “unity” – it is equally as true that, precisely as a result of this perception, the necessary conditions were put in place to create a whole new way of conceiving art and poetry. The discontinuity that is hence introduced between the universe of signs and the real provides the scope for the Romantic *Einbildungskraft*. Since, for

theatralization of conflicts and, therefore, the nihilism that imbues Novalis’s writing. This interpretation is influenced by the Hegelian metacritique of the *Romantik*, which sees romantic irony as the expression of an inclination towards apparition (“Schein”), which tends to precipitate into nothingness (“Nichtigkeit”). In connection with this recurrent critique and how it was superseded, see Jochen Hörisch, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft der Poesie*, cit., p. 90ff.

¹⁴ For an analysis of the semantic structure of the *Märchen* please see the study by Marianne Thalmann, *Zeichensprache der Romantik mit 12 Strukturzeichnungen*, Lothar Stiehm Verlag, Heidelberg 1967, in particular p. 89.

¹⁵ Procedure that consists of locating an image within itself, and endlessly repeating the sequence, thus creating an intriguing recursion effect. In literary theory, the term “*mise en abyme*” very often indicates phenomena of giving the narrative a “frame” structure, or nevertheless proposing macrostructural elements in partial or microstructural segments of the text.

¹⁶ This without wanting to deny the numerous moments of continuity and substantial convergence between early German Romanticism and deconstructionism. In this connection see Winfried Menninghaus, *Unendliche Verdopplung Die Frühromantische Grundlegung der Kunsttheorie im Begriff absoluter Selbstreflexion*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1987, in particular p. 115ff. (“Die frühromantische Semantologie als Vorwegnahme Derridas”).



the early Romantics, the imagination was the only faculty that was not linked to the laws of space and time, it was the only tool able to merge sensitivity and intellect, and combine the single elements of the experience. The arabesques and grotesque images that dot the pages of their novels and stories are indeed products of fantasy. However, they also aim to be the results of a true poetical mathematics that works by combining, overlapping, adding or replacing the simple reality of things. In the process of artistic creation, as the early Romantics (Novalis first of all) saw it, *mathesis* and *ludus*¹⁷ are therefore inextricably linked. One is the precondition for the other. So much so that, if we do not grasp this, we risk not understanding the real sense of the poetic images.

Despite not being either among the most used or the most important concepts found in the early Romantic system of thought, play therefore without doubt takes a central role in it. Unlike Kant and Schiller, for whom play is an intermediate moment between intellect and sensitivity, Friedrich Schlegel takes play as the starting point to understand the whole universe and its laws. Tellingly, in an initial passage in the *Gespräch über die Poesie* the writer compares the cosmos to an “unendlichen Spielwerk”,¹⁸ namely, to a never-ending game for those with any poetic sensitivity. In a second moment, of the speakers in the dialogue, Antonio is the first to uphold a notion of life as a “spectacle” (“Spiel”), where that which occupies the human sentiment is nought but a “sign” (“Zeichen”) representing the whole. Shifting the question to a metaphysical level, Lothario responds by introducing the fundamental idea to the discourse that “alle heiligen Spiele der Kunst sind nur ferne Nachbildungen von dem unendlichen Spiele der Welt, dem ewig sich selbst bildenden

¹⁷ Caillois distinguishes between *ludus*, that is the game ordered according to precise conventions, and *paidia*, which is instead the spontaneous and impulsive side of playfulness. In *ludus*, of which chess is one of the most widespread variants, according to Caillois, man is able to activate his own physical and mental resources in simple “gratuitous activity, undertaken and pursued for pleasure”, using his own knowledge in an instance of “pure waste” (Roger Caillois, *op. cit.*, pp. 32 and 5).

¹⁸ Friedrich Schlegel, *Gespräch über die Poesie*, in *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, edited by Ernst Behler *et al.*, Schöningh, Munich 1967, vol. 2, p. 285.



Kunstwerk”, to which Ludoviko responds with the famous statement that “alle Schönheit ist Allegorie”.¹⁹ Therefore, according to Schlegel, in an ideal pyramid of knowledge, poetic allegoresis would be placed at the top, because it is the imitation or at times the direct expression of nature itself.²⁰

From Novalis’s philosophical and poetological writings and notes, the guidelines transpire for quite a similar system to the one that emerges from the aforementioned passages, in which the theory of play and that of creativity are doubly bound to analogy. Except that, on his own account, Novalis adds a specific interest in combinatory dynamics, fostered by an extraordinary knowledge of the paths undertaken by contemporary science and philosophy of nature, against the background of a most distinct conception of the absolute. Hence, in his hands, Klingsohr’s fairy tale becomes “Poesie der Wissenschaften”²¹ – and now it will be interesting to see how.

In the *Allgemeinen Brouillon*, under the title “Mus[ikalische] Mathem[atik]”, for example, in a passage on the ability to apply combinatory calculus to the aesthetic sphere and the fantastic, we read the following sentence: “Der Dichter, der Rhetor und Philosoph spielen und componiren grammatisch”.²² Further on one reads: “Vielleicht kann man mittelst eines dem Schachspiel ähnlichen Spiels – symbolische Gedankenkonstruktionen zu stande bringen – Das ehemalige

¹⁹ Friedrich Schlegel, *op. cit.*, p. 324.

²⁰ It is therefore essential to analyse the early Romantics’ conception of play in order to achieve a further-reaching definition of their poetology of knowledge. In other words, it is a fundamental piece in the jigsaw for a study perspective that, from a historical viewpoint, delves into the interaction between literariness and the most varied spheres, practical forms and figures of knowledge. On this see *Poetologien des Wissens um 1800*, edited by Joseph Vogl, Fink, Munich 1999.

²¹ Novalis, *Paralipomena zum “Heinrich von Ofterdingen”*, in *Schriften*, cit., vol. 1, p. 343; with regard to Novalis’ mathematics see the notes by Howard Pollack, *Novalis and Mathematics Revisited: Paradoxes of the Infinite in the Allgemeine Brouillon*, in «Athenäum», VII (1997), pp. 113-140, and also the extensive reconstruction of Novalis’ studies in the Einaudi edition of *Opera filosofica* by Novalis (Turin, 1993) edited by Giampiero Moretti (vol. 1) and Fabrizio Desideri (vol. 2).

²² Novalis, *Das Allgemeine Brouillon (Materialien zur Enzyklopädistik 1798/99)*, in *Schriften*, cit., vol. 3, p. 360 (fragment no. 547).



Logische Disputirspiel glich ganz einem *Bretspiel*'.²³ And here we would already have a first piece of evidence supporting the interpretation of the image of the chessboard upheld thus far, since the process of "symbolische Gedankenkonstruktion", which Novalis deems to be eminently creative and mathematical at the same time, equates to none other than the formal model that we find in board games. However, play has also always been a poetic and epistemological model, and the subsequent reference in the same passage to the "Disputirspiel" of logic indeed only strengthens the metaphor of a knowledge that expresses itself in playful manners and movements.

The impression left by a first reading of Novalis' philosophical notes is that of a set of "principles", moreover, collected in quite a casual way, which act as "points of departure" for as many never fully formulated theories. No lines of argument can be developed from the mystic core prompting these "principles". Instead, an exponential quantity of real cells or monads of thought are created, which in turn generate sets of signs that multiply and live alongside each other on the page, without, however, contradicting each other. They are linked by a relationship of proximity which does not give rise to a true logical consequentiality. The tendency of the *alea* necessarily implied by such a lack of consequential links nevertheless does not in any way lead to a lack of logical order; if anything, it implies the use of a different order, more similar – and this is the point – to the way that human experience deals with play as *ludus*.²⁴ A later fragment seems to demonstrate Novalis' own understanding that, also from a strictly empirical point of view, for him this way of dealing with play may be a privileged form of access to the mysteries of nature. In it we read that, if the world is nothing but a "continuum" of phenomena, each of which only represents "ein Glied einer unermeßlichen Kette", man can only aim to understand the whole; but, in light of what is written above, this cognitive process can only give rise to a never-ending series of inferences that translate into an infinite game of relationships. Hence, after that and on the same page,

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 457 (fragment no. 1005).

²⁴ In this connection, see note no. 17.



Novalis notes: “Spielen ist Experimentieren mit dem Zufall”.²⁵ Hence, to play is to place oneself inside reality, while approaching it as a whole whose components are linked to each other in complex relationships. The poet, in the same way as a scientist, must therefore be a skilled player. He must have free access to the signs that he finds in the form of phenomena in nature to transform them into meanings.

This is not the place to question the intrinsically mediatory – and, as such, anti-mimetic – nature of such a thought, which gives rise to both the constructivisms and the anti-constructivisms of contemporary poetics.²⁶ Instead, it is necessary to back the theories laid down above with some significant points from the text, such as the following passage, taken from the famous *Monolog*, in which Novalis clearly sets out the traits of a playful theory of language:

Es ist eigentlich um das Sprechen und Schreiben eine närrische Sache; das rechte Gespräch ist ein bloßes Wortspiel. Der lächerliche Irrthum ist nur zu bewundern, daß die Leute meinen – sie sprächen um der Dinge willen. Gerade das Eigenthümliche der Sprache, daß sie sich blos um sich selbst bekümmert, weiß keiner. Darum ist sie ein so wunderbares und fruchtbares Geheimniß, – daß wenn einer blos spricht, um zu sprechen, er gerade die herrlichsten, originellsten Wahrheiten ausspricht. Will er aber von etwas Bestimmten sprechen, so läßt ihn die launige Sprache das lächerlichste und verkehrteste Zeug sagen. Daraus entsteht auch der Haß, den so manche ernsthafte Leute gegen die Sprache haben. Sie merken ihren Muthwillen, merken aber nicht, daß das verächtliche Schwatzen die unendlich ernsthafte Seite der Sprache ist. Wenn man den Leuten

²⁵ Novalis, *Fragmente und Studien 1799-1800*, in *Schriften*, cit., vol. 3, p. 574 (fragments nos. 140 and 141).

²⁶ At this point, such a statement should no longer come as a surprise, especially in light of the last century of research on Novalis, starting from the dissertation by Walter Benjamin on the Romantic concept of criticism. In particular, see John Neubauer, *Novalis und der Postmodernismus*, in *Geschichtlichkeit und Aktualität. Studien zur deutschen Literatur seit der Romantik. Festschrift für Hans-Joachim Mähl zum 65. Geburtstag*, edited by Klaus-Detlef Müller *et al.*, Niemeyer, Tübingen 1988, pp. 207-220.



nur begreiflich machen könnte, daß es mit der Sprache wie mit den mathematischen Formeln sei – Sie machen eine Welt für sich aus – Sie spielen nur mit sich selbst, drücken nichts als ihre wunderbare Natur aus, und eben darum sind sie so ausdrucksvoll – eben darum spiegelt sich in ihnen das seltsame Verhältnisspiel der Dinge. Nur durch ihre Freiheit sind sie Glieder der Natur und nur in ihren freien Bewegungen äußert sich die Weltseele und macht sie zu einem zarten Maßstab und Grundriß der Dinge.²⁷

These considerations that anticipate, and indeed inaugurate, the modern self-referentialist perspective on language, only apparently follow on from Kant and Schiller's aesthetic theory because, upon taking a closer look, they shift the whole issue from a purely transcendental or anthropological level to a semontological plane.²⁸ In this hint of ontology of the linguistic sign, the singular likeness between how the language of man and that of games work cannot escape us. Novalis allows us to glimpse analogies at several levels: first of all by highlighting the irrational and buffoonish (“narrisch”) basis of the psychological mechanisms of linguistic production, followed by a peroration on the *alea*, and that is on the casual, involuntary and therefore free nature of the highest and most original forms of poetic expression. However, the most important contrast that emerges from the text is that between an instrumental and an “absolute” conception of language: thus, according to Novalis, in language, like in play, the combinations arise in the freedom of movement and the self-referentiality of the sign, since “sie sich bloß um sich selbst bekümmert”.

It is equally as clear that here we are looking at a much wider perspective than could be dictated by a simple poetic self-referentialism, because it is nourished by precious philosophical and

²⁷ Novalis, *Monolog*, in *Schriften*, cit., vol. 2, pp. 672-673. Dwelling, among others, on the importance of Novalis' text in the history of the modern critique of language is Helmut Kiesel, *Geschichte der literarischen Moderne. Sprache, Ästhetik, Dichtung im zwanzigsten Jahrhundert*, Beck, Munich 2004, p. 177ff.

²⁸ The term is used here in the meaning given to it by Winfried Menninghaus, *op. cit.*, p. 72ff.



scientific-natural cognitions.²⁹ In this case, it remains a fundamental idea that words and things fully echo each other, a phenomenon that intends to reflect their interdependence, “das seltsame Verhältnis-spiel der Dinge”. And it is precisely due to this endless game of mutual relationships that Romantic writing appears to have so many layers of metaphors. The detachment from any material or instrumental logic in favour of a *modus dictandi* based on *ludus* is therefore an essential aspect of Novalis’s poetics which, tellingly, we constantly find in his works, for example in the *Lehrlinge zu Sais*, where he writes that “die echte Sanskrit spräche, um zu sprechen, weil Sprechen ihre Lust und ihr Wesen sei”.³⁰

It is also essential to linger on this aspect because, as is well known, the *Ofterdingen* was conceived of in contrast to the “künstlerisches Atheismus” of *Wilhelm Meister*.³¹ Novalis responds to the “Oeconomische Natur” and “poetische Maschinerie”³² of this work by adopting a different point of view, which it would be misleading to define as simply “more poetic” than the other. The true difference between the two narrative worlds instead consists of the *Ofterdingen*’s openness to both the oneiric element and the symbolic and allegorical reflection of the fairy tale. This openness provides more narrative possibilities, at the same time implying the abandonment of a strictly consequential storyline in favour of a freer sequentiality. As a consequence, from the start Heinrich knows he is a *homo ludens*. Already in the initial chapter of the novel, during his first impassioned defence of the dream to his father – who instead adopts the guise of the *homo faber* – he fully grasps the intrinsically playful and regressive nature of the oneiric work, considering it a relief for man,

²⁹ Among others, the following names recur in Novalis’ notes: Kant, Fichte and Hemsterhuis for the philosophical part; Schelling and Röschlaub, more specifically in the sphere of *Naturphilosophie*; Eschenmayer and Baader, for their studies on magnetism; as well as the mathematicians Friedrich Murhard and Charles Bossut for differential calculus.

³⁰ Novalis, *Die Lehrlinge zu Sais*, in *Schriften*, cit., vol. 1, p. 79.

³¹ The reason for which Goethe’s novel can even be considered “eigentlich ein Candide, gegen die Poesie gerichtet”. Novalis, *Fragmente und Studien*, in *Schriften*, cit., vol. 3, pp. 639 and 646.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 646.



that is, a “freie Erholung der gebundenen Phantasie, wo sie alle Bilder des Lebens durcheinanderwirft und die beständige Ernsthaftigkeit des erwachsenen Menschen durch ein fröhliches Kinderspiel unterbricht”.³³

But let us get back to Klingsohr’s fairy tale. The opening scene of the *Märchen*, set in Arctur’s astral court where all the constellations of the northern hemisphere gather, indeed allegorically correlates with the poetic function that Novalis gives to play and games. First, it is worth dwelling awhile on the very distinct activity that is described in minute detail:

Eine unzählige Menge Sterne füllten den Saal in zierlichen Gruppen. Die Dienerinnen brachten einen Tisch und ein Kästchen, worin eine Menge Blätter lagen, auf denen heilige tiefsinnige Zeichen standen, die aus lauter Sternbildern zusammengesetzt waren. Der König küßte ehrfurchtsvoll diese Blätter, mischte sie sorgfältig untereinander, und reichte seiner Tochter einige zu. Die andern behielt er für sich. Die Prinzessin zog sie nach der Reihe heraus und legte sie auf den Tisch, dann betrachtete der König die seinigen genau, und wählte mit vielem Nachdenken, ehe er eins dazu hinlegte. Zuweilen schien er gezwungen zu sein, dies oder jenes Blatt zu wählen. Oft aber sah man ihm die Freude an, wenn er durch ein gutgetroffenes Blatt eine schöne Harmonie der Zeichen und Figuren legen konnte. Wie das Spiel anfang, sah man an allen Umstehenden Zeichen der lebhaftesten Teilnahme, und die sonderbarsten Mienen und Gebärden, gleichsam als hätte jeder ein unsichtbares Werkzeug in Händen, womit er eifrig arbeite. Zugleich ließ sich eine sanfte, aber tief bewegende Musik in der Luft hören, die von den im Saale sich wunderbar durcheinander schlingenden Sternen, und den übrigen sonderbaren Bewegungen zu entstehen schien. Die Sterne schwangen sich, bald langsam bald schnell, in beständig veränderten Linien umher, und bildeten, nach dem Gange der Musik, die Figuren der Blätter auf das kunstreichste nach.³⁴

³³ Novalis, *Ofterdingen*, cit., p. 199.

³⁴ Novalis, *Ofterdingen*, cit., p. 292s.



The king is entertaining himself with his daughter Freya in a mysterious and complex activity, consisting of picking up a series of leaves imprinted with designs of constellations, to then put them back together. The designs are sacred and have a profound (in other words, not immediately accessible) meaning, probably because they are signs of the zodiac, or perhaps hieroglyphics. It is clear that here we are dealing with a game that could be like cards, or perhaps tarot. In any case, the way that the single characters interact definitely reflects a game, a hypothesis supported by several elements, amongst which the fact that their actions seem to follow precise rules. That it is by no means just a simple pastime can be seen on one hand by the tender relationship established between father and daughter, and on the other hand, by the ritual kiss that the king gives to the cards at a certain point. The pair's complex and regular gestures rather make one think of a ceremony, in which the whole astral court takes part.

Depending on the various sets of cards that the players show, the courtiers stand so as to form new and different figures each time. In other words, as we read in the text, they “flogen [...] den Bildern nach”,³⁵ moving like a chorus, literally dancing to the rhythm played by the cards. The aim of this movement seems to consist of guessing which of the countless possible combinations may fit together best, and which of them are in effect pleasing and can be done. The game described thus ends up involving the whole court, who participated eagerly on several occasions, as if the royal pair were giving off a magnetic field.³⁶

The image has not been chosen by chance. Indeed, it all makes us think that while drawing up these pages, Novalis was thinking of the

³⁵ *Ivi*, p. 293.

³⁶ Novalis' studies on electrical phenomena, in particular on galvanic and magnetic processes, are renowned. In the same way, there is at least a general idea that these cognitions were purposefully used in the Klingsohr fairy tale. For an in-depth listing and examination of the main theories on electricity in the Romantic age, see the monograph by Stefano Poggi, *Il genio e l'unità della natura. La scienza della Germania romantica (1790-1830)*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2000). With regard to the text in question, see Walter D. Wetzels, *Klingsobrs Märchen als Science Fiction*, in «Monatshefte für den deutschen Unterricht», LXV (1973), pp. 167-175; Hans Esselborn, *Poetisierte Physik Romantische Mythologie in Klingsobrs Märchen*, in «Aurora», XLVII (1987), pp. 137-158.



phenomenon of the so-called Chladni figures.³⁷ As is well known, they are images produced by the movement of grains of sand on a vibrating metal plate, whose form changes regularly as a result of the properties of the plate itself and the frequency of the vibrations it is subjected to, usually from the bow of a violin. The harmony created between the astral movements and what happens on the playing table is very reminiscent of this phenomenon. Caused by the effect of sound waves, to observers the Chladni images seem to be created directly by the musical element, produced by an unusual cosmic feeling that mysteriously links together the various levels of the existent. And this is why Novalis has the game played to the sound of deeply moving music (“tief bewegende Musik”) which proceeds according to the principle of the musical variation: “Die Musik wechselte, wie die Bilder auf dem Tische, unaufhörlich, und so wunderbarlich und hart auch die Übergänge nicht selten waren, so schien doch nur ein einfaches Thema das Ganze zu verbinden”.³⁸

If the game in question takes place within an astral court, the figures produced by the courtiers’ dance, in turn, will be nought but constellations, which have marked man’s time and space since time began. It is also for this reason that the dance is a fundamental moment in the narrated legend. If the book of nature is composed of ciphers (quite a widespread *topos* in early Romantic literature), it will be the poetic sense that makes it possible to grasp its meaning and

³⁷ Precise testimony of Novalis’ knowledge of Ernst Florens Friedrich Chladni’s studies on acoustics and electrostatics is given by the note entitled “PHYS[IK] UND GRAMM[ATIK]” in the *Allgemeines Brouillon*, in which he gives a detailed description of the procedure that enables figures to be obtained from sound waves: “[...] Figurierte Schallbewegungen wie Buchstaben. [...] *Farbenbilder* sind Lichtfiguren. Der Lichtstrahl ist der streichende Fiedelbogen. Was vertritt wohl hier die Stelle des Sandes? [...] Man (zwingt) eigentlich den Schall sich selbst *abzudrucken* – zu *chiffriren* – auf eine *Kupfertafel* zu bringen”. Novalis, *Das Allgemeine Brouillon*, in *Schriften*, cit., vol. 3, p. 305. Hence, it is telling that the garden described at the beginning of the fairy tale possesses all the characteristics of a sheet of metal covered by precious minerals and crystal figures, that the maidens then rub against Freya who, so charged with electrostatic energy, on touching the hero Eisen (another name that speaks for itself) gives off light and energy. Novalis, *Opferdingen*, cit., p. 291.

³⁸ Novalis, *Opferdingen*, cit., p. 293. The classic concept of variation implies the same musical idea offered in a modified and ever different form.



to decipher the symbols that they represent. It will not do so in an empirical manner, but in an intuitive (*anschaulich*) way, that is, through the purely rhythmic intuition of space of a *tableau vivant*. The synchrony of the various components in this *tableau* therefore expresses a powerful synaesthesia. From the card game we go straight onto movement, and from movement to music without the narrator explaining any connection or causal nexus between the events. Everything simply happens at the same time, may I repeat, through emanation.³⁹

Hence, the next part of the *Märchen*, set in the world of men, is simply juxtaposed with the above-described hyperuranic preamble – only in the finale will the two dimensions find a common narrative space. From the world of celestial aristocracy we descend rather brusquely to the small world of the family of Eros and Fabel. This part is also characterized by allegories and there are a wealth of references and continuations from previous parts of the novel.⁴⁰ The characters' fixed gestures inevitably conjure up the picture of a sacred conversation, namely a form of visual representation in which the symbolic interaction between the various components is arranged according to a well-defined rhythm of spaces, proportions and set gestures. At the extremes of this conversation are Fabel, the embodiment of the *Märchen's* poetic principle, and the Scribe, who instead impersonates cold and calculating intellect. In the middle we find Sophie, the protective deity and at the same time priestess of wisdom, who has an asymmetrical relationship with the two characters, since she is linked to her favourite, the little Fabel, by a profound bond.⁴¹

³⁹ In the aforementioned quotation see the expressions “Zugleich ließ sich [...]”; “bald langsam [...] bald schnell”. Zagari again uses the image of the *tableau* originating “from the unmediated co-presence of heterogeneous images”, *op. cit.*, p. 194ff, own translation.

⁴⁰ Tellingly, the structure of Eros and Fabel's family shows some similarities with the family of Heinrich himself. The motif of the child's prodigious growth is anticipated in the father's dream (ch. 1), and the motif of his divinity at the end of the so-called *Atlantis-Märchen* (ch. 3), see Novalis, *Offertdingen*, cit., pp. 202 and 227.

⁴¹ She is “Sophiens Pate”, Novalis, *Offertdingen*, cit., p. 310, as is logical, moreover, if the dimension of the fairy tale corresponds to that of play and childhood. Fabel more



Fabel is, however, the true element that propels the whole narrative, whose function is to link the various levels of reality together, performing a role comparable to that played by the god Hermes in ancient mythology. She is the one who connects the middle world of men with the underworld and the astral world, holding her own against the Sphinx and the Parzen; she is the one who softens her brother Eros to the sound of her lyre; again she is the one who reawakens her father with a galvanic chain, who gathers up her mother's ashes and uses them with the help of Zink, Turmalin and Gold to cause the electrical reaction capable of reawakening the ancient Atlas, thus helping to restore the fate of the world; lastly, it is again she who, using another galvanic chain, dissolves the magnetic field holding the beautiful Freya prisoner, thus allowing Eros to wake her with a kiss. This so-to-speak "mercurial" function of Fabel can therefore be considered an additional element in support of the preliminary hypothesis of this work: if, as upheld before, the dynamic of the *Märchen* is intrinsically playful, then the poetic principle underlying these continuous "leaps" between opposing dimensions – netherworld and astral world, realistic and fantastic, fable and physical – will be the same. Fabel therefore acts as a bridge and as an element stitching together the various worlds. She conducts the most difficult dialogues and creates the most important relationships. Wherever she goes and whatever she does, she encounters a mobile and changing world, whose elements vary and come back together precisely as if they were also involved in Arctur's initial game.

This also goes for the other characters. On the road that takes Eros and Ginnistan to the "romantisches Land", we can see how "die schönsten Farben waren in den glücklichsten Mischungen" and, a little further on, how the sky and land merge "in süße Musik zusammen".⁴² The road that leads to the golden age therefore passes through mysterious music, capable of rearranging and redefining the objects that it touches. It is not known who makes this music, but

easily manages to find the truth contained in the pure water of the magical chalice kept by Sophie and therefore always gets the better of her antagonist.

⁴² Novalis, *Offertdingen*, cit., pp. 299 and 300.



once again it is she, Fabel, who with her metaphorical weaving finally puts everything back together in a higher form of unity:

Ich spinne eure Fäden
In Einen Faden ein;
Aus ist die Zeit der Fehden
Ein Leben sollt' ihr sein.⁴³

The function that Fabel gives herself here – as the embodiment of the *Märchen's* poetic principle, lest we forget – is to poeticize the contrasts, sew up the cracks and channel the opposing dynamics into a single universal harmony. The same function that, as already said, is attributed to chess at the end of the piece. This allegory therefore helps us to better understand the deeper meaning assumed by the fairy tale in the Romantic poetological system. Indeed, its main task is to give shape to the passions and fantasy and provide a structure for the relationship that binds man to transcendency and to the world of the imagination.

However, a misunderstanding needs to be avoided. The path of the character Fabel is by no means a purely passive experience, because it proves to be a true “structuralist activity”, in the meaning given to the term by Roland Barthes, namely, closely related to the typical operations of “dissection” and “articulation” which we use to give a (necessarily arbitrary) order to the mobile fragments of reality.⁴⁴ Hence, the playful nature of the *Märchen*. Fabel's role is to weave the plot that marks the rhythm of the *récit* and in so doing she weaves relationships that involve not only the various characters, but also the symbolic worlds that they represent. Protagonist of the tale and at the same time embodiment of the principle that makes it possible, Fabel is therefore also the true metanarrative mediator between the intradiegetic plane of the weaving, and the extradiegetic plane of the discourse.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 302.

⁴⁴ Roland Barthes, *The Structuralist Activity*, in *Critical Theory Since Plato*, edited by Hazard Adams – Leroy Searle, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York 1971, pp. 1128-1130, here p. 1129.



This means that, for Novalis, telling fairy tales is a very serious game. Aimed at building universes of sense in a precarious world continually subject to contingency and risk (the thousands of traps set by the Scribe go to prove this), this activity represents and advances a free knowledge that is fitting for the poetic dimension, the early Romantics' preferred means of conveying the "fröhliche Wissenschaft".⁴⁵ Hence, against the background of continuous and progressive evolution, Fabel is the only one able to join together the most varied types of knowledge, and she carries on in her work to weave together, harmonize and reassembly heterogeneous elements in order to guarantee, using Blumenberg's successful metaphor, the "legibility of the world". If the much-longed-for reconquest of the golden age only seems possible by retrieving the genius linked to man's childhood, in the novel this can only happen by finding room for play and fantasy. And it is precisely for this reason that the fairy tale in the German *Kunstperiode* essentially combines themes and figures that aim to be *mathesis* and at the same time *ludus universalis* – "fröhliche Wissenschaft", indeed.

And here we come back to the initial image of the gifts given during the nuptials, which are the celebration of this very same reconquest. In the meantime, as already noted by Max Dietz, there is a celebration of the abandonment of the dimension of *Sehnsucht*, daughter of wisdom and chance (that is, Sophie and Arctur), to the benefit of peace, love and myth (Freya, Eros and Fabel).⁴⁶ If we are to reduce the final apotheosis to its minimum terms, in substance it is a ritual handover from the vertical and paternal male spirit to the horizontal and maternal female spirit. And if it is precisely the character of Perseus who gives the new sovereigns the chessboard as a

⁴⁵ Meant in the specific sense given by Friedrich Schlegel to this term in his "Idylle über den Müßiggang" in *Lucinde*, in *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, edited by Hans Eichner, Schöningh, Munich 1962, vol. 5, p. 25.

⁴⁶ See Max Dietz, *op. cit.*, p. 500. The complementary nature of the figures of Sophie and Arctur, both distinguished by administering a ritual, has often been ignored by the critics. It is no coincidence if in a preparatory note we find confirmation that "Sofie ist Arcturs Frau". Novalis, *Paralipomena [Studien zu Klingsohrs Märchen]*, in *Schriften*, cit., vol. 1, p. 338.



symbolic gift, this is definitely the case because, as already noted, his name alludes to the Persian origin of chess.⁴⁷ Furthermore, the East is the land of myth and dreams, the origin and at the same time point of arrival of the celestial motifs of the constellations, which makes it, so to speak, the new geographical north in the Romantic planisphere. So the “Spindel” offered as a gift to Fabel, and given by Perseus together with the chess, does indeed have a symbolic function that can be clearly interpreted in light of what has been said so far,⁴⁸ but it can also recall the function of a compass needle. The reconquest of the golden age therefore corresponds to the triumph of Fabel over her enemies, which in turn includes a profound reflection on the nature of the fairy tale and its capacity to reorient and redefine the bounds of experience. At this point it should be clear why the Pre-Romantic conception of play is a fundamental piece in the puzzle to fully understanding this reflection and, as a consequence, the whole novel. Indeed, it is known that in Novalis’ intentions, Klingsohr’s *Märchen* was to anticipate the planned but never finished conclusion of his *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*.

Translation from the Italian: Karen Whittle

⁴⁷ See Novalis, *Werke, Tagebücher und Briefe Freidrich von Hardenbergs. Kommentar und Register zu den Bänden I und II*, vol. 3, edited by Hans Jürgen Balmes, Hanser, Munich 2002²), p. 177.

⁴⁸ Fabel has to “erfreuen”, rejoice, and “aus dir selbst [...] uns einen goldnen unzerreißlichen Faden spinnen”, in Novalis, *Ofterdingen*, cit., p. 314.